

Reading in a Foreign Language
ISSN 1539-0578

April 2012, Volume 24, No. 1
pp. 106–119

Graded readers: How the publishers make the grade

Gillian Claridge
International Pacific College
New Zealand

Abstract

Publishing graded readers is big business, but there is evidence that the texts themselves are not being read in sufficient quantity to improve language proficiency. This article reports on a study of graded readers, focusing on interviews with some major publishers of graded readers, to investigate their production rationales. The findings suggest that the opinions of the ultimate consumers, the learners, are not regularly researched, with publishers tending to base production more on the demands of teachers and librarians who buy the books. The largest quantity of graded readers is produced for the intermediate levels, although if pleasure reading is the main purpose of graded readers, it would seem logical to publish a greater number of texts at the lowest level, to inculcate good reading habits from the start.

Keywords: graded readers, extensive reading, publishers, learners, levels, reading habits

The publishing of graded readers is big business, as the number of catalogues produced annually by publishers testifies. Graded readers are described by David Hill (2008), former director of the Edinburgh Project for Extensive Reading, as “books written for learners of English using limited lexis and syntax” (p. 185). For learners of English as a second, or foreign language, they are potentially a major source of extensive reading material (Bamford, 1984; Hafiz & Tudor, 1990; Hill, 2008; Mohd-Asraf & Ahmad, 2003). Because extensive reading is widely considered to make an important contribution to the language proficiency of English learners (Day & Bamford 1998, p. 4; Irvine, 2008; Nation, 1997; Nuttall, 1996, p. 127; Takase, 2007), they constitute a part of many of the extensive reading programmes used by teachers of English to speakers of other languages. Hence it seems a curious phenomenon that many learners of English are very reluctant to read anything at all, graded or otherwise (Day & Bamford, 2000). An investigation into this phenomenon is at the heart of my doctoral study on graded readers in the context of Extensive Reading in a Second Language (Claridge, 2011).

The doctoral study looks at the perceptions the three main stakeholder groups in graded readers have of these texts: the stakeholders being the learners, the teachers, and the publishers. The thrust of the thesis is that a mismatch may exist between the learners’ perceptions of the purposes

and uses of graded readers, and the perceptions of the teachers and publishers. Thus, although this paper focuses on the publishers, I have included as background a brief description of the inquiry into the other two stakeholder groups, the learners and the teachers.

Background

The Learners and the Teachers

Twenty-five learners' views were collected by means of a written survey comprising 18 questions on reading, all beginning with the phrase, "How do you feel..." which respondents had to grade on a scale of 1 to 4. This survey was translated into Japanese to avoid ambiguity, as it was the mother tongue of most of the respondents. There were also four open-ended questions that they could answer in their native language. The same survey was administered three times: when the learners began their studies at a tertiary institution in New Zealand and at the end of their first and second academic years. Their library borrowing records were also used. Ten of the cohort surveyed volunteered to be case studies. They were interviewed regularly over the two years about what they were reading and how they felt about it. Thirteen teachers' views were obtained through focus group discussion. The survey and associated data on the learners and the teachers can be found in my doctoral thesis (Claridge, 2011).

The results gathered from the learners and teachers were not statistically significant as the populations of respondents were too small, but certain trends were clear. When asked what made them enjoy a book, learners usually replied: "the story," "imagining myself as one of the main characters," "finding myself submerged in the world of the book," and "forgetting even time." What they did not enjoy about reading was generally described as "difficulty" or "boredom," which may itself have emanated from difficulty. The learners' answers indicated that they were interested in how the reading made them feel *during* the reading event rather than what they might extract from the reading *afterwards*. In short, most appeared to want a primarily emotional, rather than cognitive, experience from their reading, and this wish was constant over the two years of the survey. Nearly all of them, however, reported reading far too few books to affect their fluency or increase their vocabulary in a significant manner. In contrast to the learners' interest in an emotional stimulus from their reading, teachers' perceptions of graded readers presented a different focus. Teachers were interested in how texts could be exploited in the classroom, often for the purposes of teaching grammar or facts rather than in any emotional or affective aspects of reading. The pleasure of reading for enjoyment was only tangentially discussed, and they tended to favour giving learners texts, which were slightly above their level (i+1), rather than slightly easy texts (i-1), which could be read with a degree of fluency.

The teachers' instrumental focus is similar to the focus in the literature regarding extensive reading in a second language: while the effects of learners' reading and the teaching of reading have been widely researched and reported, less has been written about the affective side of learners' so-called pleasure reading. Neither is there much in the literature describing rationales informing what is published and the role of publishers in this field. Therefore, in this paper, I give an overview of the perceptions of commissioning editors from four major graded reader publishers: Oxford University Press, Cambridge University Press, Longman Pearson Penguin,

and Macmillan. I look particularly at whether publishers are more interested in fostering enjoyment in reading, or providing material for exploitation as a teaching tool. I also include as a kind of benchmark the views of the judges of the annual Extensive Reading Foundation Award, abstracted from the Extensive Reading Foundation website, and the views of David Hill, whose regular surveys of graded readers have influenced publishers and teachers alike.

Methodology

Rationale for Choice of Publishers

At the time of my study, the library of the college where I work and conducted my study had in its collection, 899 books classified as graded readers in its collection, and of these, 703 were published by the four major publishing groups named above. Because these were the books mainly used by the students I studied and taught, their publishers were those selected for investigation. Macmillan has absorbed Heinemann, so I have included the Heinemann Guided Readers in the number. It happens that all four publishers are represented in the nine examined in Hill's (1997, 2001, 2008) Graded Reader Surveys in the 16+ age group.

Data Gathering

I collected data on the views of publishers by interviewing commissioning editors from all four publishers. My aim in interviewing the editors was to "access the perspective of the person being interviewed" (Merriam, 1988, p. 72), thus, in this case, to access the views of their respective publishing companies. The editors in question were Jennifer Bassett, of the Oxford Bookworms, Philip Prowse and Maria Pylas from the Cambridge Readers, Nhala el Geyoushi from Penguin Longman, and Sorrell Pitts, of Macmillan. These editors all very generously gave up their time to talk to me about their passionate commitment to producing excellent graded readers. Information from interviews with them, from some of their writings, and from the websites of the parent houses reveals differing perceptions of the ideal purpose and contents of a graded reader. In addition to interviewing the editors, I was able, during the course of my study, to interview David Hill, of the Edinburgh Project for Extensive Reading, and his views are included here.

Results

Publishers and their Backgrounds

The four publishers can be divided into two groups: the university presses and the publishers owned by large corporations. Oxford University Press (OUP) and Cambridge University Press (CUP) are two of the oldest publishing houses in Europe.

OUP printed its first book in 1478; only two years after Caxton opened the first printing press in England. It received a decree from the Star Chamber in 1586, confirming its privilege to print books. It was granted the right to publish the King James 1 authorised version of the Bible, which apparently was very profitable and a "spur to OUP's expansion" (OUP, 2010)

Cambridge University Press (CUP) was granted a charter by Henry VIII in 1534 to publish academic and educational works. It is described on its own website as “an educational charitable enterprise, trading with vigour throughout the world and publishing over 2400 titles a year” (Black, 2000). Both publish important dictionaries, and since the explosion of English Language Teaching (ELT) publishing in the 1960s, both have become major players in the production of ELT materials. Graded readers are included among these materials. Each publishing house currently has a series dedicated to producing graded readers for the 16+ age group: these are the Oxford Bookworms, set up in 1988; and the Cambridge English Readers, set up in 1999.

Penguin Books was founded more recently, in 1935, by Sir Allen Lane, previously of the Bodley Head (Penguin, 2010). His mission was not to educate, but to supply good quality contemporary fiction to a British public, which until then, had been largely unable to afford to buy books. The first Penguins were colour coded, orange for fiction and green for crime, and cost six pence each, which in present day New Zealand currency would be less than 10 dollars. As well as supporting the right of the working person to read literature, Penguin also gained a reputation as a champion of free speech. It took on the Crown in 1960 in the trial of DH Lawrence’s *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* under the Obscene Publications Act and won its case. Penguin was bought by the conglomerate Pearson in 1970, and Pearson later absorbed Longman, the publisher that in the 1930s, had brought out Michael West’s staged reader series for Bangladeshi school children. As a result of these amalgamations, the graded reader series were combined as Penguin Readers, under the umbrella of Longman Pearson.

Macmillan (Macmillan, 2010) was founded in the 19th century by two Scots from the Isle of Arran. It has published some eminent figures such as Charles Kingsley, Matthew Arnold, Lewis Carroll, W. B. Yeats, and John Maynard Keynes. It is also responsible for the Groves Dictionary of Music and Musicians. Its academic and reference division is called Palgrave Macmillan, and the Heinemann Guided Readers, described by Hill (2005, personal communication) as a ground-breaking series edited by John Milne, was absorbed into Palgrave Macmillan as Macmillan Guided Readers. Since 1995, the company has been owned by a German media group called the Georg von Holtzbrinck Publishing Group.

The Interviews

Interviews with three of the editors were recorded, transcribed, and sent to the respondents for approval. The fourth editor was interviewed by telephone. I then transcribed the interview and sent to her the notes taken during the conversation. The transcripts and notes were subsequently analysed according to the frequency of key words. The broad themes that emerged from the analysis were story, or topic, format, culture, and marketing. The editors’ opinions are summarised in Table 1 below.

Table 1. *Editors' choice*

Publisher	Cambridge Readers	Oxford Bookworms	Macmillan Guided Readers	Penguin Readers
TEXT				
A good story	✓	✓	✓	✓
Classics and adaptations	✗	✓	✓	✓
Originals	✓	✓	✓	✓
Film tie-ins	✗	✗	✓	✓
CULTURE				
PC or not?	✗	✗	✓	✓
FORMAT and SUPPORT				
Notes and glosses	✗	✓	✓	✓
Online support	✓	✓	✓	✓
CD	✓	✓	✓	✓
MARKET				
Teachers consulted	✓	✓	✓	✓
Learners consulted	Sometimes	Sometimes	✗	✗

Themes

Text: Story or Topic

This category included the purposes of graded readers, the choice of the story or non-fiction topic, whether it was an adaptation or an original, and how the levels were determined. Only the university publishers mentioned the academic purpose for which learners might be reading graded readers, and both of them referred to Krashen (1987) and his language acquisition theory of comprehensible input. Oxford Bookworms spoke about reading being equivalent to conversation as a means of exposing the learner to language, and even more importantly, of its function in satisfying a human need for stories. Cambridge Readers said that learners read in order to improve their ability to communicate internationally in English, but also for entertainment.

When discussing choice of story or topic, Oxford Bookworms and Cambridge Readers diverged in some respects. Cambridge Readers thought that the genre should be clearly defined, whereas Oxford Bookworms were not so concerned about the clear distinction of, for instance, a love story from an action thriller, but more that “the schema or framework has to be set up early in the story and the reader has to willingly suspend disbelief, or it will not work.” But both were adamant that a good story was essential. Oxford Bookworms referred to the need for a book to be “unputdownable.” Perhaps as a result of this, they have a flexible approach to sensitive subject matter. Cambridge Readers has a deliberate policy of not fighting shy of *strong* subjects such as HIV, mixed marriages, and racism. Oxford Bookworms, when referring to subjects that might be considered taboo in some culture like sex outside marriage, described how Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* is very popular in Jordan because students can relate to it. The Oxford Bookworms editor explained that it is acceptable in a Muslim country partly because it is

a classic, and partly because, as a graded reader, it will not be taught as part of the curriculum, but will be read at home.

However, the other two publishers had a rather different attitude to story lines and controversial topics. Macmillan Guided Readers said that they have a clear policy on the type of story that they consider suitable. In construction, they must be simple: their stories must be linear with no flashbacks, confusion or multiple narrators. With regard to content, they must not include sensitive topics such as *strong* religion or homosexuality. Topics must engage the reader, of course, but political correctness is never far from the mind of the commissioning editor. Penguin Readers made the same point about content.

In addition to the differences in attitudes to story topic, a major debate among the publishers revolves around whether to commission original stories in reduced code or to adapt published books for native speakers. Within this larger discussion is the question of whether the classics are better suited to adaptation than modern novels. Cambridge Readers firmly advocates original texts, but Hill (2005, personal communication) criticised this attitude, as he found that story lines which have already worked are likely to be better than those created specifically as vehicles for learner literature. His possibly rather cynical view is that many of these originals are rather “thin” stories (Hill, 2008). However, he does agree that there are honourable exceptions, such as Antoinette Moses, the author of *Jojo’s Story* and *John Doe*, published by Cambridge Readers, and Tim Vicary, writer of *Chemical Secret* and other titles for Oxford Bookworms. Oxford Bookworms, Penguin Readers and Macmillan Guided Readers all do adaptations, and all of them advocate adapting the classics, as well as more contemporary novels, for various reasons. As stated above, one of Oxford Bookworms’ fundamental tenets is “a good story that will stand the test of time,” and that is surely a definition of a classic. There is also the advantage, as with *The Scarlet Letter*, that the classics have a certain cachet and respectability, which are both good marketing ploys. However, Cambridge Readers claim that adaptations of the classics are not generally done well, and the problem with adaptations is often that although the lexis and syntax are controlled, the content is not, making it difficult for learners from cultures alien to the setting of the story to understand. Cambridge Readers strongly support the notion of “information control,” which means that their stories tend to be more “culture-free” than the others, even if there is still a discernible modern western cultural background to many of them. This cultural semi-neutrality is in fact, one of Hill’s objections to the Cambridge Readers’ graded readers, which he said, tend to have “simpler plots and thinner characterisation, especially at the higher levels” than the adaptations of classics (Hill, 2008). Perhaps in response to this criticism, Cambridge very recently brought out a series of graded readers for teens called Discovery, which does include a few adaptations.

Attitudes to the book-of-the film adaptations are also very different. Cambridge Readers, Oxford Bookworms and David Hill are very much against them, but Penguin Readers are particularly in favour. Both Penguin Readers and Macmillan Guided Readers cited the advantages of the free advertising that a popular movie, such as *Dante’s Peak*, can give to a GR. However, Cambridge Readers find them incomprehensible to learners, especially those who have not seen the film, and Oxford Bookworms explain the difficulties of re-telling a film. Without visual cues some written sequencing is impossible to follow for a native speaker, let alone a learner. Hill (2005, personal communication) also objected strongly to film stills being used to advertise graded readers as he

said the actors are usually far too glamorous for the characters they are meant to be representing. This has not stopped the publishers who do re-writes using film or television stills as cover pictures, presumably because of the advertising value these have.

Levels of Language

All the publishers divide their graded reader series into levels appropriate for certain degrees of English proficiency, according to the number of headwords and the structures expected to be known at that degree. If the purpose of reading is enjoyment then the grading of readers is particularly vital so that learners are not discouraged when faced with a text that is clearly too hard for them to read fluently. Notwithstanding this necessity, there seems to be a consensus of opinion among the editors that although each publisher's particular level list is used as a guide for the writers, these lists should be neither prescriptive nor proscriptive. Oxford Bookworms acknowledged that it is impossible to estimate accurately the lexicon of students, as it differs with each individual according to interest and experience. Cambridge Readers remarked that certain genres may require certain vocabulary not within the given lexicon at certain levels. For instance, a Level 2 thriller with an indicated level of 700 headwords may need to include the words *kill*, *die* and *shoot*, even if they are not within the frequency range at that level.

However, even accepting this need for flexibility, there are surprisingly wide differences among publishers in the numbers of headwords deemed appropriate at each level, and each one has a slightly different way of dividing the headwords. Cambridge Readers now have 3800 headwords in the list they describe as advanced, Macmillan Guided Readers have a top level which they describe as upper intermediate with 2200 headwords. These discrepancies do not make choices easy for learners. The Common European Framework should have simplified life by providing a benchmark, but in fact, books that have 400 headwords are classified as A1/A2 by Oxford Bookworms, while Macmillan Guided Readers have put books with 1100 headwords in their A2 list. Wan-a-rom (2008) found that although publishers may base their word lists on Michael West's (1953) general service list, they do not always conform to it, nor do their own lists match up. The table below supports his contention.

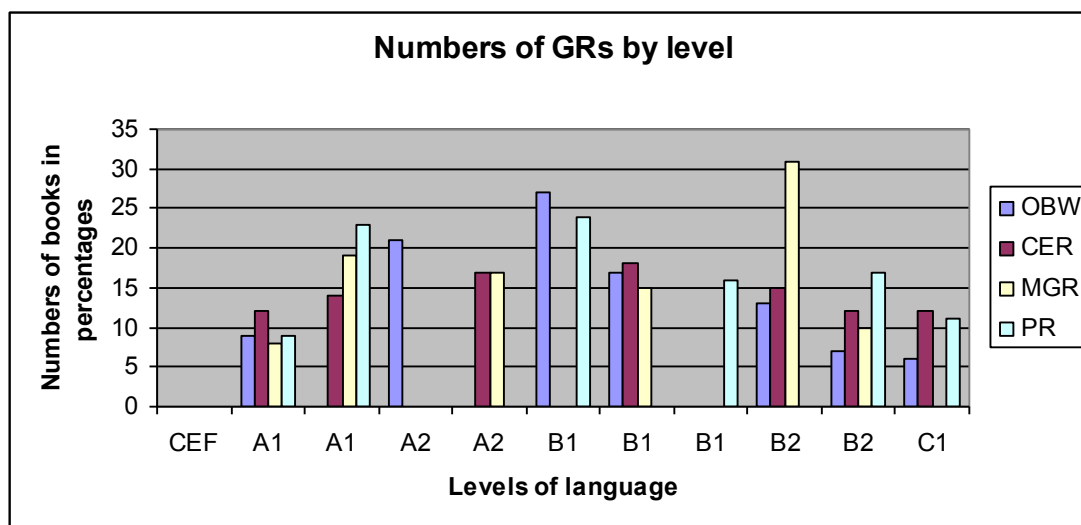
Table 2. *Publishers' wordlists aligned with the Common European Framework (CEF)*

CEF	Oxford Bookworms	Cambridge Readers	Macmillan Guided Readers
A1	250	250	300
A1	400	400	600
A2	400	-	1100
A2	700	800	1400
B1	700	-	-
B1	1000	1300	1400
B1	1400	-	1600
B2	-	1900	-
B2	1800	2800	2200
B2	2500	-	-
C1	2500	3800	-

Note. Sourced from publishers' websites. Penguin Readers is missing as its website does not provide an equivalence with the CEF.

Wan-a-rom (2008) noted that although there is a good overlap between different publishers' lists at the 1000 word level, there is less correspondence at the 2000 word level, where presumably, the choices of words are more extensive. Hill (2005, personal communication) also noted the discrepancies between the lists and the actual contents of the books. He commented that some of the readers, especially Penguin Readers, do not progress evenly in difficulty, while Oxford Bookworms demonstrate the most regular progression.

The numbers of books produced at each level vary, but the largest numbers are produced for the intermediate range of ability, between the 1000–1700 headword levels, as shown in the table below. Penguin Readers explained that this is where the demand is highest, and it is reflected in the lists of all the publishers. There are certainly fewer graded readers produced at the lowest proficiency level, and very few above the 3000 word level stage, between graded readers and the 9000 word level. Nation (2006) suggested it is necessary to read literature for native speakers; he said that, "If we take 98% as the ideal coverage, a 8,000-9,000 word-family vocabulary is needed for dealing with written text" (p. 79). Although Cambridge Readers are trying to close the gap and now have an advanced level with 3800 headwords, there is still a long way to go.



Key: OBW: Oxford Bookworms; CER: Cambridge Readers; MGR: Macmillan Guided Readers; PR: Penguin Readers

Fig. 1 Numbers of graded readers by level, showing that the majority of them are produced for the upper elementary and intermediate levels.

Design

The format of the graded readers was only discussed in detail by Oxford Bookworms, as far as artwork and design were concerned. And perhaps it is significant that Hill (2008) thought the Oxford Bookworms series was well-designed in those areas. He felt that none of the four publishers made their 16+ series colourful enough, citing a European publisher, CIDEA, which produces a series called Black Cats, as an example to be followed. They use colour pictures inside the books, not only on the covers. To improve the quality of their illustrations, they have increased the size of the publications to A5 (21cm x 14.75cm) instead of the usual, slightly

smaller format of 19 x 12.5 centimetres. Hill says this makes their books much more attractive; it follows also that they are more expensive. Regarding cover design, Oxford Bookworms talked about their perceptions of the different expectations of various markets; the Oxford Bookworms series has a dark, sophisticated background for the cover, which looks more “grown-up” than, perhaps, the covers of the Penguin Readers with their film tie-in pictures. Oxford Bookworms are very particular that the cover should reflect the content, so that with an adaptation of the DH Lawrence novel *Love among the Haystacks*, there is a Victorian valentine on the cover, suggesting an era that pre-dates women’s liberation. But its muted, grown-up look may be less appealing to an Asian market, used to a more “cutsey,” manga style, than to a European or American one. As far as the inside of the books are concerned, Oxford Bookworms stressed the importance of the font, margin sizes and leading (line spacing), all of which have an impact on learner readers, particularly those whose native orthography is not the Roman alphabet.

Although the artwork and fonts were not discussed as much as the content of the books, the question of support as part of the design of a graded reader was an important topic of discussion in the interviews with the editors. The perceptions of Cambridge Readers echo Oxford Bookworm’s assertion alluded to above that the audience would prefer to be treated as “adult” rather than “school child.” Hence Cambridge Readers completely exclude explanations, glossaries, and any other “support” from their texts, which are designed to look as much as possible like “normal” books for an audience of native speakers in a leisure reading situation. But they do provide online support for those who want it. On the other hand, Oxford Bookworms, although they have responded to the need to treat learners as adults in the book design, feel that it is quite reasonable to include notes, suggestions for discussion, and language-focused questions, and that notes are especially appropriate when the culture being described is very different to that of the learners. Penguin Readers were more obviously inclined to focus on the demands of their market. They suggested that the Asian market, for instance, is particularly fond of questions, exercises, and glossaries, so learners would feel cheated if their graded readers did not include such insertions. Hill (2008) was also very much in favour of notes, but clearly made the point that there are questions and then there are questions; he thinks that display questions do not serve any useful purpose. He also pointed out that learners are at liberty to ignore the questions if they wish, and simply read the text.

The Judges’ Criteria

This article describes four major publishers in the field of graded readers, but they are not the only contenders in the area. Therefore, to situate them in the context of other graded reader publishers, I will look briefly at the perceptions of an independent arbiter of graded readers produced in English for language learners, the Extensive Reading Foundation (ERF). Day and Bamford have redefined graded readers as language learner literature, a term “analogous to the terms *young adult literature* and *children’s literature*—established genres in their own right” (Day & Bamford, 1998, p. 64). It seems fitting that Richard Day should be the chairman of the ERF, a charitable organisation whose purpose is to support and promote extensive reading. As Day and Bamford also conceived the Ten Top Principles for Extensive Reading (Day & Bamford, 2002), it is a reasonable assumption that the ERF supports the precepts of reading often, reading a lot, and reading for pleasure.

The Foundation holds an annual competition for the best language learner literature, which, as it becomes increasingly widely known, is likely to exert an increasingly important influence on the type and quality of graded readers produced. In this section I describe information from the EFR website to demonstrate the rationale of the judges in the 2009 and 2010 competitions in making their awards.

The 2009 Adolescent and Adult section results saw two winners in the Cambridge Readers series, one for Oxford Bookworms and one for Macmillan Guided Readers. Although Hill (2008) noted that the best Cambridge Readers books were produced at the lower levels, one of the Cambridge Readers winners is *Nelson's Dream*, by JM Newsome, at the Upper Intermediate to Advanced level. True to Cambridge Readers' avowed principles, it deals with a highly controversial issue; it is described by the judges as "heart-warming love story set against the heart-wrenching background of the impact of HIV/AIDS." The other Cambridge Readers winner is a beginners' level book called *Why*, by Philip Prowse. The judges' verdict on this one was: "Pioneering. Serious issues are presented in excellent, understandable prose complemented by superb illustrations. It is a good story which has a human dilemma at the heart of it." The Oxford Bookworms winner was *Land of my Childhood: stories from South Asia*, by Claire West, at the intermediate level. The judges described it thus: "These touching, engaging stories open up other worlds while making you think more about your own. Clare West is a master storyteller. Each story she retells is complete without spelling out every detail. As one reader put it, she 'gives readers enough imaginary space.' An excellent collection." The Macmillan Guided Readers winner is another beginners' level book, a re-write of the classic *White Fang*, by Jack London, re-told by Rachel Bladon. The judges said of this: "A gripping story that is just as gripping in its adaptation. The technical skill of structural and lexical control is first class, and the illustrations support comprehension." The types of stories featured in the winners are typical of the publishing houses concerned; the Cambridge Readers texts are originals, the Oxford Bookworms is a re-write and the Macmillan Guided Readers is a classic. The judges' verdicts seem to underline the concern evident in the interviews, especially with Cambridge Readers and Oxford Bookworms, to present a story that is gripping and well-written. Illustrations also play a part.

The 2010 awards went to Cambridge Readers, an Oxford University Press non-fiction publication (an account of the Titanic by Tim Vicary), and to two publishers not examined in my study: Mary Glasgow and ILTS & Hueber Verlag. The *Titanic* was for elementary readers, and the judges said: "Even working at such an elementary level, the author manages to convey facts in a reliable and interesting way, and it is clearly well-researched." This seems to be evidence, contrary to David Hill's opinion, that it is possible to write non-fiction graded readers with some success. The Cambridge Readers winner was, as in the previous year, a title for Advanced/Upper Intermediate readers. It was *The Best of Times?* by Alan Maley, a book about a troubled Malaysian teenager, and the judges' comment was: "In addition to being an interesting story, many readers complimented the life lessons that come out in the books in a way that was natural and authentic." Interest seemed to be the common factor in the judgements in 2010, plus the ingredients of pace and incentive for readers to read on. In neither year do the criteria appear to include any support material that goes with the books; they are simply judged upon their presentation and literary merits. The judges, at any rate, are apparently interested in the learners' enjoyment of the books as stories or narratives, rather than whether they will provide teaching

tools or a means of measuring linguistic proficiency.

Discussion

The four publishers in my study can be divided into two groups: the university presses, and the publishers owned by large corporations. At the International Association of Teachers of English as a Foreign Language (IATEFL) 2002 conference, a panel of editors from all four discussed the question: *What makes a good Graded Reader?* In the report, Macmillan's Sarah Axten (2002) remarked: "It was interesting to have confirmed how closely parallel the aims and intentions of our different series seem to run." It is certainly true that each of the editors, when asked to talk about graded readers, were united in speaking mainly about fiction, which perhaps indicates that they agree with Hill's (2008, p. 187) contention: "only fiction provides the type of text that can develop a learner's fluency." Their views may also reflect his opinion that good non-fiction graded readers are hard to produce because "they make demands that cannot be met by graded text, which permits the expression of only the simplest of information which everyone knows already" (Hill, 2008, p. 187).

However, in spite of basic agreement between the publishers that a good story well told is fundamental to a good graded reader, there are basic differences in the attitudes to the perceived needs of the learners, which reflect the publishers' perceptions of learners' cultures and acceptance of topics. Cambridge Readers is the most proactive of the publishers in producing work in sensitive areas, while aiming to make texts more acceptable to all markets by situating topics in relatively "culturally neutral" contexts. Their attitude seems to correspond to their approach of treating the learner as an adult, able to make choices and capable of autonomous learning. This may reflect a more western cultural perception, which assumes the individuality of the learner. Oxford Bookworms take the view that most topics can be dealt with if they are approached sensitively. They do not shy away from problem topic areas, but they do not court them deliberately. The other two publishers are very much more politically correct in their choice of subject matter and the illustrations that go with them.

The philosophies which guide the choices of the four publishers used in this study differ, principally because two are old university foundations, not totally constrained by market demands, whereas the other two are presumably subject to the requirements of their shareholders. The university presses can spend more time on editing and revising, and appear to be less bound by political correctness. Penguin Readers and Macmillan Guided Readers are happier to use the marketing advantages of tie-ins with other media, even if the educational and literary advantages are not entirely obvious.

It would be wrong, however, to say that Oxford Bookworms and Cambridge Readers ignore the constraints of the market. It is notable that all four publishing houses, to a degree, respond to voices in the market that they perceive to be the most influential: the teachers and librarians who buy the books. Macmillan Guided Readers told me that they never survey the learners; Penguin Readers obtain their marketing data from agents and teachers; Oxford Bookworms and Cambridge Readers do survey the learners but not on a regular, or universal basis. While in responding to market demand, all four produce the most graded readers for the intermediate level,

(see Table 2) although mathematics might suggest that the largest learner group of all, the beginners and elementary learners, should be the logical target group for the most graded readers.

Hill (2008) actually suggested that the whole canon of graded readers currently produced is “too high-brow,” (p. 189) aimed at a rather narrow, academic, market, and that “most of them [language learners] would be happier with a Mills and Boon, or thriller, or western, type of book, than a classic” (2005, personal communication). The fact that an average graded reader library usually contains numerous adaptations of classics may on the face of it add weight to this contention. However it is also true that there is a large number of graded readers in all the publishers’ lists, both classics and others, including plenty of romantic fictions, thrillers, and action tales.

These differences between the publishers have led to major variations in the areas of subject and support, and suggest a variety of expectations about whether the reader is expected to read for pure enjoyment, or to extract a measurable quantity of learning from reading. Cambridge Readers, with their apparently non-interventionist approach, would seem to hope for an aesthetic, “enjoyment” approach from their readers; ideally, they will enjoy the books without being expected to answer questions on them or produce any measurable outcome. Whether learners are totally capable of reading the texts from the stance of a pleasure reader depends partly on the quality of the in-built scaffolding provided by the lexical, syntactical, and information controls. The level of language is critical in this case as it must be easy if it is to be enjoyed, rather than worked at. The expectation of Oxford Bookworms is also that learners read the series for the joy of reading. It is the Oxford Bookworms editor who speaks of the reader being drawn, willy-nilly, into the fictional universe, and of the “unputdownability” of a book (Bassett, 2005). Yet, Oxford Bookworms does not ignore the value of “scaffolding” the learner to enable her to enjoy reading, by providing notes and glosses. Macmillan Guided Readers were not so eloquent about the need for a good story, but instead for a story that would not present lexical, structural or cultural problems for the learner; this opinion also supports an expectation of an enjoyable, uninterrupted, reading of a book, assisted by notes. Penguin Readers, while agreeing on the necessity for a good story, was more focused on market demand, which often included teacher demands for activities that go with the graded readers; while the readers are expected to enjoy reading, they are also expected to do exercises and answer questions.

Conclusion

In examining graded readers for any one factor which might either encourage or discourage learners from reading, it is hard to pinpoint an area where the publishers as a group could be at fault. The four described here all agree with the judges of the ERF awards in that a good story, well-written for the level, is the ideal model for a graded reader. How a good story is defined is another matter, and this criterion to a certain extent must depend on the taste and personality of the editors, and the aims and ideals of their respective publishing houses. There are different perceptions of how a text for non-native speakers must either be adapted or conceived in order for it to form comprehensible input for the learner. Publishers and judges all appear to agree that texts should be “well-written,” and this may assume a literary bent to their production, but whether that would in itself discourage or encourage learner readers is doubtful. The success of

the four publishers in the market place and in the ERF arena indicates that the products are satisfactory in the views of business and reading professionals. However, the question of why learners do not read enough remains unanswered.

So, are the publishers making the grade? In many ways, collectively they are doing an excellent job. The variety of top quality material certainly caters to the important criterion of choice for learners. It hardly seems possible that it is the fault of publishers that learners are not reading. But, if not the publishers, then who?

According to the evidence gleaned from the learners themselves, their teachers and the publishers, it seems clear that the respective perceptions of the stakeholders are at odds. The learners would like to enjoy a good story, but if they are to enjoy it, the story must be easy enough to read without effort, and it also must be worth reading. However, their teachers want them to read texts that are just a little too hard for that to happen. According to the publishers in this study, and the evidence on their websites, most graded readers are produced, in line with the wishes of the teachers, for the group of learners who are at the upper elementary to intermediate group of learners. If they are to read easily and for pleasure, learners should be reading extensively at i-1, the level below their perceived proficiency level. This would be the elementary level. Yet, most of the books are actually at the intermediate level.

Teachers of English as another or second language thus need to change their attitudes towards the recommended levels for extensive reading. If teachers insist that learners select easy books, publishers will produce them. There are some outstanding graded readers written for beginners, although there are not enough. It is the number of graded readers of excellent quality at the very bottom levels that should be developed in order to “hook” the learners of English into extensive reading at the earliest opportunity. The levels above the existing advanced level, which would provide a bridge between graded readers and teen fiction written for native speakers, also require development. The first of these two lacunae, in particular, would seem to indicate a major need in the arena of English learning, and incidentally, a marketing opportunity of significant proportions.

References

- Axten, S., Bassett, J., Hopkins, A., & Prowse, P. (2002). *The graded readers debate: Summary*. Paper presented at the IATEFL, York.
- Bamford, J. (1984). Extensive reading by means of graded readers. *Reading in a Foreign Language*, 2(2), 218–260.
- Bassett, J. (2005). What makes a good reader? *Oxford University Press ELT Teachers' Club*. Retrieved from www.oup.com/elt/teachersclub/articles/reader?view=Print&cc=gb
- Black, M. (2000). A short history of Cambridge University Press. Retrieved from http://www.cambridge.org/au/knowledge/isbn/item1166363/?site_locale=en_AU
- Claridge, G. (2011). *What makes a good graded reader: Engaging with graded readers in the context of extensive reading in L2*. (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand.
- Day, R. R., & Bamford, J. (2000). Reaching reluctant readers. *English Teaching Forum*, 38(3),

- 12–17.
- Day, R. R., & Bamford, J. (1998). *Extensive reading in the second language classroom*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Day, R. R., & Bamford, J. (2002). Top ten principles for teaching extensive reading. *Reading in a Foreign Language*, 14(2), 136–141.
- Hafiz, F. M., & Tudor, I. (1990). Graded readers as an input medium in L2 learning. *System*, 18(1), 31–42.
- Hill, D. (1997). Survey review: Graded readers. *ELT Journal*, 51(1), 57–81.
- Hill, D. (2001). Graded readers. *ELT Journal*, 55(3), 300–324. .
- Hill, D. (2008). Graded readers in English. *ELT Journal*, 62(2), 184–204.
- Irvine, A. (2008). *Extensive reading and L2 development: A Study of Hong Kong secondary learners of English*. (Unpublished Doctoral Thesis). University of Edinburgh, UK.
- Krashen, S.D. 1987. *Principles and practice in second language acquisition*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall International
- Macmillan (2010). Macmillan, from <http://international.macmillan.com/History.aspx>
- Merriam, S. B. (1988). *Case study research in education: A qualitative approach* (3rd ed.). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Mohd-Asraf, R., & Ahmad, I. S. (2003). Promoting English language development and the reading habit among students. *Reading in a Foreign Language*, 15(2), 83–102.
- Nation, I. S. P. (1997). The language learning benefits of extensive reading. *The Language Teacher*, 21(5), 13–16.
- Nation, I. S. P. (2006). How large a vocabulary is needed for reading and listening? How many words do you need to know? *The Canadian Modern Language Review*, 63(1), 59–82.
- Nuttall, E. (1996). *Teaching reading skills in a foreign language* (2nd ed.). Oxford, UK: Heinemann.
- OUP (2010). *A short history of Oxford University Press*. Retrieved from http://global.oup.com/about/oup_history
- Penguin (2010). Penguin Books. Retrieved from http://www.penguin.co.uk/static/cs/uk/0/aboutus/aboutpenguin_companyhistory.html
- Takase, A. (2007). Japanese high school students' motivation for extensive L2 reading. *Reading in a Foreign Language*, 19(1), 1–18.
- Wan-a-rom, U. (2008). Comparing the vocabulary of different graded-reading schemes. *Reading in a Foreign Language*, 20(1), 43–69.
- West, M. (1953). *A general service list of English words*. London, UK: Longman, Green & Co.

About the Author

Dr. Gill Claridge is English, but did some of her schooling in Malaysia. She has a degree in Russian Language and Literature, a post-graduate teaching qualification in French, and a doctorate in Applied Linguistics, with a focus on the reading of second language learners. She moved to New Zealand from the UK ten years ago and is currently acting Dean and head of TESOL at International Pacific College, Palmerston North. She is an avid reader, enjoys creative writing and plays the piano and golf, equally badly, with great pleasure. Email: gclaridge@ipc.ac.nz